SYNOPSIS

"Mysticism of Isaac of Nineveh compared with mysticism of Rabindranath Tagore"

This is a study on mysticism comparing Isaac of Nineveh the seventh century Syriac mystic with Rabindranath Tagore in Gitanjali. These two mystic authors are so auspicious for the modern man as they appeal very much to the confused and wavering spiritual consciousness of the present day. Isaac's spirituality appeals to the modern man because of his amazing and uncompromising spirituality of a compassionate heart. 'It is the heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists.' A seeker of Truth and Consolation finds solace in Isaac's explanations and interpretations on the judgment of God and hell. 'God is love and His love is inexhaustible and is present everywhere even in hell'. Isaac's reasoning on the incarnation of Jesus Christ speaks volumes about the essence of his whole approach on Mysticism: Jesus Christ's incarnation was not for the human sin but on account of divine love, i.e. as an expression of his eternal nature as self giving love. Rabindranath Tagore's 150th Birth anniversary, centenary of the Nobel Prize winning *Gitanjali* and the centenary of the introduction of our National Anthem *'Jana Gana Mana'* together poise a great moment to cherish the legacy of this great poet – mystic especially in comparing his mystic concerns with an ancient staunch mystic, Isaac. The hundred and three lyrics in *Gitanjali* positively and convincingly explore the poet's mystical experiences in varied shades and colours. These poems expose unusual sensitivity to natural beauty and nature's unending illuminations and at the same time reveal mystical significance in the wonder that surrounds common, ordinary natural things.

Chapter I - General Introduction

Spiritual masters of all ages and cultures affirm that man can achieve the fullest spiritual realization i.e. a union with the transcendent, either abruptly or through a particular methodology. Various religious systems promote different types of this pilgrimage to Moksha. Hindu Philosophy proposes Jnana Marga, Karma Marga or Bhakti Marga for

attainment of Moksha. In this age of globalization, a comparative study of two ancient cultures and spiritual systems would be appropriate and relevant. Isaac of Nineveh is one of the two most sought out authors of Syriac Mysticism. The influence of Isaac's concepts on mysticism is enormous in the present day, especially his views on the 'Mercy' of God, especially, the 'Primacy' of Mercy which is the foundation of adoration and humility. Perhaps this merciful heart of Isaac, brought to perfection in the division and upheaval of seventh-century Persia, is precisely what draws the modern mind. So many persons throughout the world are attracted to Isaac. Through his writings, he may be able to offer consolation to a modern society not unlike the seventh-century Babylonia in its political upheaval and crisis in faith. The research on the mysticism of Isaac is one of the scopes of this study. The second part of this research delves rather comprehensively on the mysticism of the great Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore, thus attempting a comparative study of Isaac the seventh century Semitic Mystic with the modern Poet – Mystic. An important and to some extent a perennial issue in comparative mysticism concern the similarities and differences among mystical experiences and mystical doctrines. Is mystical experience in fact, one and the same for all in its essential structure and function or are there irreducibly plural forms of mystical experience? There is no definite answer to this question. In this background we try to compare the glimpses of mysticism of Tagore as exposed in '*Gitanjali*' with the basic thrust of Isaac in his personal encounter with God especially his tripartite process of mystic realization. Hence, an attempt at relating – two streams of mysticism both basically oriental leading to a unique ocean is relevant because it may usher in a new civilization and consciousness where the divine image in man becomes the foundation of his existence in all times and cultures. And, since he would elevate himself above earthly things to go out from the world of sense, to free his soul from the burdens of selfishness and gross materialism, to break through from the outer darkness to the enlightening world of spirit

Chapter II – Isaac of Nineveh: The Person and Time

Chapter II deals with Isaac, his personal life and his time. Very little is known about Isaac's life. There are only two references which give details about his life. One is in the *Book of Chastity* of Isodnah, from the early ninth century. The other reference is by

Rahmani, from a fifteenth century manuscript in Mardin. He was born in Bet Qatraye in the Seventh century. Patriarch George consecrated him and he held the office of the shepherd of Nineveh for five months and abdicated his episcopy. And he moved to the monastery of Rabban Shabur and died at an advanced age. The reasons for Isaac's motives in resigning the episcopate are seriously disputed and discussed. We do not have full details regarding this. But hints generally point out that the reason is both spiritual and theological. Isodnah confirms that there was jealousy surrounding the person of Isaac: "He wrote three things which were not accepted by many. Daniel rose against him on account of what he had said ... I believe that jealousy awakened against him". Another theory regarding his resignation is about Isaac's concept of the 'primacy of mercy'. Isaac's works in general are divided into two parts. The first part contains 82 chapters of varying length and contents. It is titled *Mystic Treatises* by A. J. Wensinck. *The Second Part* of his writings contains 41 spiritual treatises that have been discovered recently. Various translations and an Italian version of a third collection also are available today. Regarding the time of Isaac in history we may note that no where else in Christendom, conflict and upheaval were seen as serious as in Syria in the early centuries. To know Isaac and his mystic visions, it is fitting to look back to the background which promoted him ecclesially. In a later chapter, the individuals who influenced his thoughts will be discussed in brief. Here we restrict it to Syriac Christendom from a secular point of view, without considering the theological exigencies and disputes of the time. The centuries before the time of Isaac were clearly periods of political conflicts and divisions. The religious background of Isaac was intense both in secular events and spiritual commitment and dedication. One thing to be noted here is that at this time there was little Christological controversy striking hard. The thrust was heavily on the study of the Bible, dedication in life and martyrdom. Hence the soil was very much sensitive to the seed of monasticism and mysticism. Isaac was one of its prominent products.

Chapter III - Mysticism

The main thrust of the thesis is Mysticism, So a comprehensive study of the various aspects of mysticism as Definition of Mysticism, Mysticism and Religion, The aim of Mysticism, Mysticism- the basic Assumptions, The Essentials of Mysticism, Its theological

and psychological implications, The Threefold Process in Mysticism, Mysticism in Christian context, Mysticism : a divine ecstasy and the beginning of glory, Mystic ecstasy: the 'ineffable speech', Pauline Mysticism, Three-phase process in Christian Mysticism, Mystic Experience, Semitic Mysticism as Jewish and Islamic Mysticism are described in this chapter. The study on mysticism in this chapter is concluded with an analysis pointing to the fact that all mystic experiences finally and ultimately meet in a single point, but that point assumes widely different aspects according to the mystic's religion, race and temperament. Three mystic experiences are generally discussed. They are: a) Panenhemic or nature mysticism, a special kind of experience which is a sudden rapport with nature often arrived at in a striking and intimate way. b) Monistic Mysticism relating to Advaita, Shankhya Yoga, Buddhist, kind of experience. It is the realization of the eternal oneness of one's own soul. c) Theistic mysticism attained strictly in Christian, Muslim and other theistic contemplation. It is the 'mysticism of the love of God'. Thus mysticism in the final analysis is directed toward the world beyond language, a world of pure, serene, spiritual and transcendent silence.

Chapter IV - Isaac, a Splendid Representative of early Oriental Mysticism

Isaac is a representative of his times. Early Syriac Fathers and mystics paved the general background for Isaac in forming his mystic concepts. The early writings of the Fathers and mystic traditions prevailed in the Semitic world both influenced Isaac basically in creating in him a sense of wonder and thirst for the beyond. The principle of unity, the unity of God and his church were the solid pillars on which Ignatius built his solid edifice of mysticism. *Didache* places great importance to the two ways, the Way of Life and the Way of Death. *The Odes of Solomon* are hymns on the unity of God and creation. *Didascalia,* being a book on Law puts greater thrust on living a life in purity and holiness. *The Acts of St. Thomas,* teaches on the old man and the new man. Besides the above early influences, the later influence on Isaac is mainly from the fourth century i.e. from Evagrius. Isaac's concept on natural contemplation has direct influence from Evagrius.

The concept of spiritual knowledge without the support and sequence of intellectual knowledge is derived from Macarius. A basic invitation into the full understanding of the nature of spiritual life and its analysis on the basis of the tripartite division, Isaac receives from John the Solitary. Theodore of Mopsuestia's strict adherence to the concept of Divine Economy as revealed through the Scriptures influenced Isaac in formulating and expressing his mystical convictions. The later Syriac authors like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Abba Isaiah, Stephen Sudaili, Anan-Isho, Dadisho of Qatraya, John of Dalyatha also contributed to the ascetic metamorphosis of Isaac. Besides the Syriac authors and Semitic tradition, Isaac's mystic outlook was amplified through his contacts with secular mystic philosophy – mainly the philosophy of the School of Alexandria and the Stoics. With Isaac there is an affinity of thoughts and concepts even with the Muslim Sufism.

Chapter V - Basic Terms and Concepts in Syro-Mystic Tradition

Chapter V is a thorough and in depth analysis of the basic terms and concepts in Syro – Mystic tradition. The technical terms discussed in this chapter include *iḥdāyā, dakyūtā, bnay qyāmā, bṭulūtā, qadīšūtā, dakyūtā, šafyūtā, dakyūtā pagrānūtā, dakyūtā nafšānūtā, dakyūtā ruḥānūtā, tahrā* and *temhā, te'orya, sukkālā* and *i'dasta. hawna, ruḥa* and *lebā.* In addition a compact list of the Syriac terms related to mystic terminology also is given. All later Syriac authors and mystics were influenced by a proto-mystic atmosphere that prevailed in Syriac Tradition. Up to the fifth century, there were strong and solid undercurrents in this regard through the writings and experiences of Aphrahat and Ephrem. This prevalent notion of mysticism is generally understood by analyzing the common terminology existed in a certain period of experience. Hence in order to understand the basic thrust of Isaac on mysticism an analysis of certain technical terms in mystic tradition is helpful.

Chapter VI - Mysticism of Isaac of Nineveh

A strictly systematic analysis of mysticism is not possible in Isaac's mystic phenomenology. Just like Bar Hebraeus and other mystics, Isaac also shrinks from divulging in most intimate mystic experiences. The main features of Mysticism as found in

Isaac (*Mystic Treatises* and *The Second Part*) are Mysticism most intimate and personal, Mysticism and Dualism, Mysticism and Pantheism, and Tripartite Methodolgy. Repentance and Purification and Perfection are dealt in the thesis so extensively as they may be applied to Tagore at a later stage in the thesis. For Isaac 'Repentance is the constant sorrow of the heart at the meditation of that inexplicable statute'. The methods adopted by Isaac in Repentance are also discussed on the basis that it is basically an encounter with the passions of the body. The second stage is Purification which is the way of the soul. The considerations under purification are 'senses as screen', Soul originally Pure, Purification of body and soul, Purification of mind and heart and Purification and Asceticism. The third and final stage is Perfection. Under this head I have considered subjects as Contemplation (*te'orya*) and sight, 'Pure Prayer', Love of God, Symbols of ecstasy, image of drunkenness, perfection and resurrection, mingling with God, and tears and wondrous insights, the mystic way of knowledge, the tripartite way to knowledge and 'ecstasy'- *tahra* and *temha.* Since the theme of the love of God is the basis of Isaac's Mystic theology special consideration on God's Love and Mercy is given at the end of the chapter. The works and literary discourses of Isaac are at the same time theological and exercises on mystical analysis. They are also glimpses of his personal mystic experiences. As St. Paul he also makes use of the phrase "I know a man who etc" with a disguised personal reference. Thus the personal character enters in to his impersonal utterances. "Now I know one who even during his sleep was overwhelmed by ecstasy in God, through the contemplation of something which he had read in the evening… it was in the depth of the night and suddenly he awoke from his sleep while his tears dropped as water and fell upon his breast; and his mouth was full of glorification". Isaac, like most of the mystics of his time has an aversion to dogmatic disputes. Dogmatics usually cause dissension but Isaac considers that mysticism and unconditional love of God direct all to the one, Loving Father.

Chapter VII - Tagore the Person and the Poet

Tagore was born in Calcutta on 7th May 1861 and died on 7th August 1941. Every human being is a product of his time. The age of Tagore was ushering in influences from various fields of activities - religious, spiritual and political. In all his thoughts and works

Rabindranath gave spontaneous expression to his innermost feelings, emotions and personal experiences. Whatever touched his heart, he profusely gave expression to it not on account of any analytical exposition, nor on any specific ideology but everything found expression in letters from his innermost feelings. The basic thrust of his poetic urgency was his humanism. "No Indian poet since Kalidasa in the fourth century wrote so much about Man and Nature". Every human being is a product of his time and environment. There is always a tradition and history for every human being in his growth to maturity. In fact the age of Tagore was ushering in influences from various fields of activities, religious, spiritual and political. The presence of East India Company, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Fort William College, Bengal Gazette, The Hindu College, Brahma Sabha established by Rammohun, Calcutta Medical College, Tattvaranjani Sabha for promotion of Indian Philosophy and Religion, The Sepoy Mutiny (1857), India coming under British rule, (1858) Railway link between Bolpur and Culcutta, The Foundation of the University of Calcutta, The presence of Brahmo Samaj- all these and many other factors promoted the person and outlook of Rabindranath Tagore.

Chapter VIII – Tagore: a mystic

Tagore is a mystic and Ch. VIII attempts to find out the mystic traits in Tagore from his writings and life. His works *The Rreligion of Man*, *My Reminiscences, The Religion of An Artist*, vouches with autobiographical flavour for the mystic concerns of Tagore. The influence of the Bible and his constant contacts with Christian atmosphere also encouraged Tagore in viewing everything in mystic charism. In this thesis mysticism as found in *Gitanjali* is the prime source of study. *Gitanjali* is analysed and explained in a mystic animation and is studied under the titles, *Gitanjali:* mystical imagery and symbolism, Nature-Mysticism, Mysticism of Joy, and Mysticism of Suffering. A prominent feeling that we enjoy in the study of *Gitanjali* is that Tagore makes no effort to appeal to any deemed concepts to our intellect. Rather, he almost appeals and arrests our heart to inmost feelings of love and longing for Creator as our beloved who transcends this world of man and nature and yet remains immanent in it. According to Tagore, nature is the melody of God. Man is ultimately bound up with nature. God, man and nature – all these entities have kinship. Tagore is the greatest admirer of nature. In nature he finds the affection,

inspiration and spiritual love. Man and nature are inseparable. Tagore believed in the oneness of man and nature. For this, he does not keep his own identity apart from nature, but mingles freely with it and does not even mind losing his own identity in that of nature. Like man, nature is also one of the myriad roles of his creation, the source of joy and his love for mankind - the river, flower, sun, moon, stars, trees, leaves, all symbolize his love for mankind. For Tagore, poetry itself is a mystical experience because it always inspires the beholder into innumerable heights. The substance of all his poems and versification is the identification of God's will in the daily nuances of nature's life. The poems are the rendering of thoughts, inspirations and intuitions of the poet. Its implications and initiations vary from reader to reader. And this is the strength of true poetry. But, for Tagore, the final meaning of each verse is neither of the poet nor of the beholder but of the Divine Master, because it is to him that everything is pointed.

Chapter IX - Comparison Between The Mysticism of Isaac Of Nineveh and the Mysticism Of Rabindranath Tagore in *Gitanjali*

Chapter IX is a study on comparison between the Mysticism of Isaac and Tagore. Though belonging to two different ages and cultures, the mystic experience of both is in many ways similar. Both culminate in a radiance of joy. The concepts of God- experience suddenly being thrust upon the mystic is another common feature. The essence of their Mysticism is an experience of direct communion with God. The primary source being the sacred scriptures, creation, the handy work of God plays a vital role in promoting their ecstatic illumination. Both of them tread the same path to achieve illumination and mystic experience. Just as in Isaac we comprehend a tripartite methodology in *Gitanjali*. The following common fields are substantially investigated: Repentance- a conversion to the poor, Repentance- a breaking of the screen, the curtain, Repentance- a realization of inner self, Repentance- God's mercy and human tears, Repentance and Vigilance, Repentance and Surrender to Divine Will. In Purification, the second stage Tagore is in communion of vision with Isaac in the following aspects. They are, the original purity of the soul, Purification- a process of 'not yet' and journey, Purification through tribulations, Purification and Mercy of God, Purification and Love of God, Purification and renunciation of the world, Purification and image of drunkenness, Purification and solitude

and purification and approach to death. In perfection we identify certain key attitudes of Tagore which promote him to a union or mingling with Divine Master. Like Isaac, for Tagore prayer is the medium, and humility is the door to perfection. The role of human tears is an expression of an overflow of joy and an outburst of wonder at the sudden and spontaneous ecstatic experience. The golden rule that the mystics never follow a proven path to reach their goal of realization of the divine, applies also to Tagore and Isaac. However considering the uniqueness of their journey and earnestness of their craving for the divine love, they are obviously fitted into certain natural schemes.

Chapter X - General Conclusions

In my General Conclusions (Chapter X) I have tried to ascertain my findings on comparison and suggestions for future study after discussing the dire and extreme necessity of an awakening in spirituality and mysticism. In fact Isaac is not a systematic theologian. Hence he is not consistent in using certain terms with its characteristics and specific meaning. In the same way we can not compartmentalize Tagore to a systematic linguistic terminology. A glaring dichotomy regarding the ‘renunciation of the world’ may appear while discussing the renunciation of the world as found in Isaac and Tagore. For Isaac renunciation of the world is a sine qua non for attaining purification where as for Tagore purification does not guarantee a renunciation of the world. In this, Tagore remains a mystic with an ironic difference. For him this universe and all its vibrant beauties and functions belong to God. And to renounce them would be a conscious and purposeful ingratitude to God and in short it amounts to the denial of the existence of God. However, for Isaac the renunciation of the world is not the denial of the external world but the mortification and disciplining of one’s inner self, the world within. For Isaac withdrawal from and renunciation of the ‘world’ meant not the physical removal of oneself to a monastery or the desert but separation from 'bodily behaviour and carnal thought. Renunciation of the 'world' is an interior state, and not something exterior. Renunciation of the inner world of self is essential for any one who wants to draw near to God. This involves a radical re-orientation of one’s life and attitudes. If upon self examination we find that we are ruled by love of riches, the accumulation of belongings, self-indulgence (which gives rise to sexual desire), love of honour (which is the source of envy), the exercise of authority, self-esteem and pride of office, self-enhancement, a high reputation

among men (which gives rise to resentment) or fear for the body, we are indeed still in the world. Thus, according to Isaac the 'world' turns out to be nothing other than the ‘self’ which Christ himself called upon his disciples to deny. Thus even in the case of renunciation of the world where one could argue an apparent disharmony in understanding, Tagore and Isaac reach at a common platform of comprehension and communion of vision. In *Gitanjali* the spiritual concepts are more of an attitude than some spiritual concepts of terminology.

I have also explained some challenging and questionable concerns of mystical experiences in this Chapter for the sake of further studies and investigations. This is the Freudian concept of ‘regression’ as the cause of mystical experience. Finally, the enlightenment which the modern world today boasts of is only a freedom of man from ignorance and superstitions through reason. But reason is only a partial expression of Self. It fails to unshackle him from his own selfishness, sensuality and predatory instincts. This task can only be accomplished by recognizing the full glory of Self as *Sat, Chit and Ananda* or the Temple of God, through a spiritual and mystical awakening.

Besides the main body of the thesis I have appended (i) Quotation from the Bible used in *Mystical Treatises* and in *The Second Part* of Isaac of Nineveh.(ii) A sketch of the translation of Isaac Part I (iii) Citations from the Fathers (iv) Phraseology and Terminology used by Isaac in Part II as a result of the influence from the Fathers.

Finally I may confess that as of yet there has been no other scientific and systematic thesis comparing Isaac of Nineveh and Rabindranath Tagore (*Gitanjali*). This study thus contributes to a significant advance in the field of the literature of Oriental Syriac Mysticism and throws open the door for further research and study.

THOMAS K.K.

Kottayam,

6th March 2012